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Feminist geographies and intersectionality

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Abstract

In this intervention, I raise questions for feminist geographers who use intersectionality in their work. First, I invite feminist geographers to consider their expertise in relation to the significance of locality and the role of social context as a crucial factor in intersectional analyses. Second, I query the focus on multiple axes of difference and question the need to focus on specific axes over others and how this may be resolved. Finally, the issue of methods in research about intersectionality is explored and I reflect upon research with ethnic and religious minority young people that adopted an approach informed by intersectionality in order to provide a focus for this discussion.

Keywords: axes of difference; feminist geography; intersectionality; research methods; social context

Introduction

What Hancock (2016) calls ‘intersectionality-like’ thinking has been important to the development of feminist geographies (e.g. Kobayashi and Peake, 1994, Peake, 1993, Pratt and Hanson, 1994). One of the earlier publications in geography to engage with the idea of the mutual constitution of inequalities – in this case around race, gender and class – was Ruddick (1996: 138) who noted that the discipline had:

...moved beyond viewing gender, race, and class as distinct categories that operate independently in an additive fashion. These now are recognized as mutually *transformative* and *intersecting*, each altering the experience of the other.

Significantly, Ruddick’s (1996) work engages with the work of black activists and feminists who were responsible for developing the concept (e.g. Crenshaw, 1989, 1991, Collins, 1990). Since this work in the early and mid-1990s, within feminist geography, research that directly employs or critiques intersectionality has continued to develop (Brown, 2012; Peake, 2010; Valentine, 2007) and recently we have seen a significant growth in work in this area,

examples including intersectionality being used in research about: transgender issues (Abelson, 2016); masculinities (Hopkins and Noble, 2009); prostitution (Silva and Ornat, 2014); animal geographies (Novorka, 2015); political ecology (Mollett and Faria, 2013); development and migration (Bastia, 2014); and the experiences of students (Foulds, 2015) and young people (Irazabal and Huerta, 2016; O'Neill Gutierrez and Hopkins, 2015). More attention could usefully be paid to the earliest work in feminist geography (e.g. Kobayashi and Peake, 1994, Peake, 1993, Ruddick, 1996) that adopted intersectionality-like thinking as there is a tendency for geographers to overlook these significant early interventions. Moreover, more sensitivity should be shown to the activist origins of intersectionality and its introduction into the academy by black feminists (e.g. Collins, 1990, Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). To ignore such work risks reproducing geography as a white, colonialist and masculinist discipline (Hopkins, 2017). In this piece, I raise questions about the significance of locality, the focus on multiple axes of difference, and the methods used in intersectionality to pose some challenges and questions for feminist geographers who employ intersectionality in their work.

Collins and Bilge (2016) discuss the key ideas that underpin intersectionality and identify six key characteristics: social inequality; power relations (which can be analysed via intersections of say racism and classism but also across different domains of power); relationality; social context; complexity; and social justice. As such, intersectionality is a lot more than simply multiple identities. By social context, Collins and Bilge (2016) are referring to the examination of intersecting power relations and they refer specifically to the importance of considering the different historical, intellectual and political contexts that shape these. Furthermore, 'attending to social context grounds intersectional analysis' (Collins and Bilge, 2016: 29). It strikes me that feminist geography has an important role to play in expanding, deepening and enhancing how scholars engaging with intersectionality

conceptualise and work with ideas about social context; this is essentially about the role of locality and the importance of place in shaping and being shaped by the other key characteristics of intersectionality. So, a key challenge for feminist geographers using intersectionality is to explore the role of locality and place in shaping the intersections between different inequalities and power relations. Intersectionality is a contested term and spatial metaphors are often employed to explain what it is and how it works – this includes it being seen to be a crossroads, an intersection, an axes of difference and so on (Davis, 2008). I would contend that geographers have yet to make a significant contribution to what has been called ‘intersectionality studies’ (Choo, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013) especially when it comes to understanding and exploring the role that place, space and scale have when working with intersectionality. Important work has taken place within feminist geography that uses an intersectional framing and some of this work is summarised above, but geographers have yet to make a significant impact on the broader field of intersectionality studies.

Theorisation of multiple inequalities is a central issue for many scholars interested in gender studies (Walby, Armstrong and Strid, 2012) and feminist geographies. Phoenix and Pattynama (2006: 187) note that intersectionality ‘foregrounds a richer and more complex ontology than approaches that attempt to reduce people to one category at a time’. One question that often arises in debates about intersectionality is whether it is appropriate to only consider the intersection of two axes of difference or if additional intersections also need to be considered? For example, is it appropriate to only consider the intersection of gender and race, or of gender and class without necessarily paying much attention to issues of age, disability, religion and sexuality? Yuval-Davis (2011) makes the point that for specific people in particular contexts there are some social divisions that will be more important to others in terms of how they construct the social standing of individuals; divisions such as gender, ethnicity, class and lifecourse positioning are likely to shape most people’s lives in

the majority of places whereas social divisions relating to disability, caste or refugee status will affect smaller groups of people on a global scale (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Those social divisions that shape people's lives are important and need to be fought for and made visible (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Essentially then the answer to the question posed above is about the significance of specific social divisions and their influence on people's lives. Part of the challenge here is that being able to explore specific intersections in-depth and to engage with these in a complex and sophisticated way requires time and space. This means that using Intersectionality in feminist geographies is a careful balancing act where the relative significance of social divisions in people's lives needs to be considered alongside the depth and richness required for an intersectional analysis.

Despite its popularity, there has been much debate about what intersectionality means and how it should be used (Davis, 2008; Hancock, 2007; Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006) – as has been noted 'people use it in different ways, sometimes inconsistently and with ambiguity' (Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006: 188). Crenshaw (1991) differentiates between structural and political intersectionality and McCall (2005) between three distinct approaches to intersectionality that she labels as intra-categorical, anti-categorical and inter-categorical. Added to this is Hancock's (2007) differentiation between unitary, multiple and intersectional approaches to the study of categories of difference. One of additional challenges that the development of intersectionality presents for feminist geographers – and indeed for gender and women's studies scholars more generally – is that little has been said about what methods to use when working with intersectionality (McCall, 2005, Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006). Put simply, intersectionality is not a method and there is no one specific method associated with it. Valentine (2007) uses narratives or stories as an approach to researching intersectionality and Rodo-de-Zarate's (2014, 2015) research with young people in Catalonia uses 'Relief Maps' to collect, analyse and display intersectional data. Jordan-Zachery (2007)

has found researchers using a wide range of approaches including surveys, content analysis, biographical approaches, in-depth interviews, narratives as well as discourse analysis in their intersectional work. The different methods that can be used in intersectionality studies – and the complexities involved in using these - presents fruitful ground for future critical reflection by feminist geographers.

A recent project I was involved in explored the situations of ethnic and religious minority young people in Scotland with a specific focus upon their experiences of racism and misrecognition (Botterill et al, 2016; Hopkins et al, 2015, 2017). One of aims in this project was to analyse the experiences of our participants within a framework that takes cognisance of the intersectionality of ethnicity with other relevant positionalities such as religion, gender, social class and locality. For us, this required an approach to research that was open and exploratory and for which we decided to use focus groups and interviews. With both methods, we employed them in a flexible and open way providing space for participants to raise concerns and discuss issues that were of importance to them. With some of the younger participants, we also used participatory diagramming (Kesby, 2000) and then worked with the outcomes of the diagramming exercises to then have a discussion about the matters that the young people had raised as being of importance to them. Furthermore, although we worked with an interview schedule of questions, we employed this flexibly in order to provide space for our participants to talk through the social divisions most significant to them. I would not contend that this provides the ‘answer’ to longstanding questions about what methods to use with Intersectionality, however, it offers some possibilities for taking work forward in this arena.

To enable research participants to open up about and discuss those social divisions that are most significant for shaping their everyday lives requires an approach to research that is open, exploratory and provides respondents with an opportunity to share parts of their lives

that the researcher may not necessarily have considered significant. For example, a project about gender inequalities may focus on social divisions relating to gender and race but for some people, the intersection of gender with class or sexuality may be feel more significant to their marginalisation than the intersection of gender with race or ethnicity. There are lots of ways in which researchers can explore social divisions but participatory methods may be particularly useful here as they are hands-on and enable people to share their experiences and generate knowledge in their own terms and using their own forms of communication such as words, pictures, art and so on (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2010).

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Notes on Contributor

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